

# Family Dinner

At Astoria's Pachanga Patterson, you can eat just like the staff does **BY GLORIA DAWSON**



Food good enough for the help at Pachanga Patterson.

**W**HEN WE'RE SO busy considering everything that happens at every restaurant we eat in, it's easy to forget about the family meal. It's the meal that chefs and restaurant staff enjoy when we—the noisy, demanding and allergic—are not around. Pachanga Patterson, a recent addition to what's been dubbed Astoria's new restaurant row, gives us a glimpse into this meal, and it turns out there's a reason we love chefs so much. They eat well, even when we're not looking.

Pachanga Patterson's tag line, "Mexican food by New Yorkers," sounds more like an insult from a visiting Texan than a viable restaurant concept. But the idea came from the 20-plus years the owners spent in New York City restaurants eating family meals cooked with the ingredients found in the restaurant, but always heavily influenced by the culture of the cooks making the meal, who were often Mexican. The philosophy, says Giuseppe Falco, one of Pachanga Patterson's owners, allows the kitchen to "cook whatever you want to cook without someone saying this isn't Mexican."

Bringing these meals, which are often an exercise in improvisation, to a more permanent menu is executive chef Michelle Vido, who owns Pachanga Patterson with Falco and Leonardo Sacco. Vido's restaurant experience, working with

Patricia Yeo and at Little Giant, comes through in winks and nods in the menu, like her propensity for Asian fish sauces and pickling all sorts of vegetables. The restaurant sources a lot of those veggies and other menu items from Brooklyn Grange, the rooftop farm in Astoria and other local purveyors.

Falco likes to say that at the restaurant, the kitchen "cooks with no limitations," and although there's a mix of ethnicities and styles, the food manages to be straightforward, letting the unique combination of ingredients shine. It's familiar foods that are not quite so.

Start with a classic: guacamole and tortillas (\$7). The Pachanga salad (\$6) is large enough to be a light meal. A salad is not the protein- and carb-filled family meal that I remember eating before gearing up for an evening of waitressing, but here Vido shows she can take the menu beyond the heavy dishes often associated with Mexican cuisine. The combination of greens, jicama and pickled red onion topped with spicy peanuts and chipotle-lime dressing make for a refreshing kick. Another stellar starter is the stuffed chili (\$5); the twist here is it's filled with cous cous, quinoa, cranberry beans and walnut cream sauce.

For something a bit heavier, try the tacos, which come three to an order. The

Portobello mushrooms (\$7), topped with garlic, red pepper and provolone cheese—were good, but the moo shu duck tacos (\$9), with sriracha, hoisin, cucumber and radish, are the tacos to beat. I stole a few bites from a generous friend on my first visit and ordered them all to myself the second time around. On the second taste, I began to understand the full magic of the dish: duck cooked in its own fat makes for a perfectly juicy, crumbly filling that stays in the taco but still melts in your mouth.

Out of the larger dishes, the veggie jenga (\$10) is my pick for a meat-free offering, but it shouldn't be reserved for vegetarians only. The layers of beans, avocado and eggs on a tostada play well together in this twist on huevos rancheros, which comes with puréed sweet potatoes. Another main dish to try is the roasted pork belly enchiladas (\$14), smothered in a chocolate, fig and peanut sauce.

Pachanga Patterson diners, mostly young and local, enjoy their eclectic meals in a setting that's part Mexican surf shack. There's a weathered wood bar and one whitewashed brick wall to contrast with the other brightly colored ones, all adorned with Día de los Muertos artifacts and fish rubbing prints. This fits the seaside vibe and hints at the Asian influences on the menu. The name Pachanga Patterson itself is a hybrid. Patterson, Falco told me, was the previous name of the street the restaurant sits on around 80 years ago (it's now called simply 31st Avenue), and Pachanga is Mexican slang for fiesta.

Sure, chefs are often known for their hard-partying ways, but from my time waitressing, I remember drinking on the job being frowned upon. And that's where



you've one-upped the chefs, because you'll want to try the La Pachanga Margarita (\$10). Don't let the pink color fool you (the key ingredient is hibiscus juice); this drink has a kick. Also sip the refreshing Tequila Mockingbird (\$11), made from muddled cucumber, mint and a splash of champagne. There's also house-made sangrita and a good selection of tequilas, mezcals and wines by the glass or bottle, including some local wines on tap.

If you have room, finish off your evening with another nod to a kitchen Vido is quite familiar with, her other joint, Astoria's Vesta. The El Diablito chocolate cake, with caramel and chilies, is a devilish version of Vesta's heralded Baby Jesus Cake. I was too full on my visits, but the devil knows I'll be back soon. ☺

**>> PACHANGA PATTERSON** 33-17 31st Ave. (betw. 33rd & 34th Sts.), Queens, [www.pachangapatterson.com](http://www.pachangapatterson.com).

## WALKER'S

**Great Selection  
of Draft Beers  
& Wine by the Glass**

**Live Jazz  
Sunday Nights**

**Gabriel's  
Fabulous Brunch  
Sat & Sun 11-4**

**Now Open at 11 am 7 Days a Week**

**16 N. Moore St (at Varick) 212-941-0142**

